

Saint Peter and Paul Church (Sinan Pasha Mosque), Famagusta: A Forgotten Gothic Moment in Northern Cyprus

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In it [Famagusta] there are old buildings and beautiful churches going back to ancient times, some of which are now empty, and others have been converted into Turkish mosques. Who having seen the beauty...will not weep about it, or who having seen the skill and the art with which [they have] been constructed will not be amazed by it? ¹

Basil Grigorovich Barskii, 1727

When Pope Urban II called the Council of Clermont in 1095, and in so doing ordered the start of the Crusades to the Holy Land, it was neither obvious nor predictable what the consequences for Cyprus might be. Within a century the island had been gifted to the French and thus embarked on a millennium which subjected the indigenous population, by way of commerce and occupation, to Lusignan, Venetian, Genoan, Ottoman and British socio-political influence. As a consequence there remains today a cultural and aesthetic eclecticism which manifests itself in the rich juxtaposition of styles and influences apparent in the buildings which stand as the monolithic legacies of these ideological rivalries and power struggles. Lawrence Durrell, one of the islands most celebrated literary residents, succinctly described this phenomenon in the 1950s:

Different invasions weathered and eroded it [Cyprus], piling monument upon monument. The contentions of monarchs and empires have stained it with blood, have wearied and refreshed its landscape repeatedly with mosques and cathedrals and fortresses. In the ebb and flow of histories and cultures it has time and time again been a flashpoint where Aryan and Semite, Christian and Mosiem (sic), met in a death embrace.²

The church of St Peter and St Paul has not only borne witness to almost seven centuries of this struggle, but stands as an icon of the rich and transient dynastic rivalries which in turn moulded the identity, and therefore the appearance, of modern Cyprus. Though overshadowed, undoubtedly, by the 'The Daughter of Notre Dame of Rheims' [St. Nicholas Cathedral]³, both now seem architecturally and doctrinally out of context in a Muslim (verging on secular) society, on an island in the far reaches of the Eastern Mediterranean, where their decaying remains stand as a symbol of wealth and power from long forgotten halcyon days in the island's history.⁴ As a barometer of civic pride, refined aesthetics and Northern European engineering prowess, the church represents only a fragmented hint, a shattered remnant, of this brief cultural zenith and period of extreme economic prosperity. Surrounding SS Peter and Paul are the ruins of Greek and Latin churches, Venetian palaces and crusaders' fortifications, which, though fundamentally different in doctrine and architecture, at some point in history met a similar calamitous fate. The church of St. Peter and

St. Paul, used as a mosque, a barn, a grain store, a petroleum repository and a library in the past, has now been disused for some time. It does, however, defiantly remind us of its *raison d'être*, symbolizing the intended permanence of the Medieval Church and embodying the great outpouring and abundance of labour, skill, faith and wealth, so typical of the Lusignan era.

A Brief Cultural Context: Famagusta

The French crusader Guy de Lusignan acquired Cyprus on his return from defeat at Hattin at the hands of Saladin's army in the Third Crusade of 1192.⁵ With him, came the Lusignan dynasty, and therefore the wide ranging influences of Medieval France, a country already half a century into the Early Gothic Period which had boasted architectural triumphs like the choir of St Denis, the façade of Amiens Cathedral, the construction of Notre Dame in Rouen and the Royal Portal at Chartres Cathedral. Socially and economically the fortunes of Famagusta were inversely proportionate to those of the crusaders and their holy mission, and so, St Nicholas Cathedral, one hundred meters away from St Peter and St Paul, came to represent the zenith of this wealthy yet un-triumphant society, as it was appointed the coronation place for the Lusignan dynasty as Kings of Jerusalem (and later of Armenia), after they had been crowned in Nicosia as Kings of Cyprus.⁶ Syria, no longer a viable option for merchants trading with the Orient, gave way to Cyprus, and specifically Famagusta in place of Acre, to represent the eastern most outpost of Latin Christendom in the Mediterranean and the hub of commerce.⁷ The fifteenth century Greek author Leontios Makhairas therefore could write:

And because the Saracens held Jerusalem, and because of the enmity between them and of many troubles, the kings assigned this honour to Famagusta, and the seals and the mint, that when the Kings of Jerusalem were to be crowned they went to Famagusta.⁸

In 1311 Bishop Baldwin Lambert, asked his archbishop, Gerard of Langres, for money and very possibly for an architect and some French craftsmen, in order to get the now almost stagnant work on the cathedral, and other Famagusta churches, revitalized.⁹ In 1299 that same archbishop had departed from Cyprus, possibly to his home in Sens, in the Champagne region of France, and so it seems plausible that it was from here that the architect and craftsmen would have been sent. Folda has suggested too that Greek craftsmen were called upon to paint Latin altarpieces in the churches under construction at this time.¹⁰ In 1373 the Genoese invaded and the victors found the town run down and work on many of the ecclesiastical buildings entirely halted again.¹¹ By the time of their departure, however, just under a century later in 1464, the cathedral, like St. Peter and St. Paul, would have been finished and James the

Bastard (with the help of an Egyptian force) could be crowned, married, then buried in Famagusta, all within a decade. His queen, Caterina Cornaro, of Venetian descent, continued to rule as Queen of Cyprus for a further fifteen years, with advisors from Venice, but finally abdicated in 1489, yielding the government of Cyprus to Agostino Barberigo, Doge of Venice.¹² The town by now however, previously one of the wealthiest in the Genoese Republic, and one which a German writer believed had riches surpassing that of Constantinople and Venice, was well into its terminal decline.¹³ This deterioration was catalysed in 1546 and then again in 1568 when Famagusta suffered earthquakes and storms which damaged many buildings. But in 1570 the *coup de main* came with the Ottoman invasion which took Nicosia, then Famagusta, in hideous and bloody sieges. Moderately charitable terms for surrender were offered to the Venetians following a thirteen month siege, then instantly revoked as Mustafa Pasha flayed alive the defender of the city, Marco Baragadino, by the west portal of the now badly damaged cathedral, having promised him safe passage to Crete. Baragadino was dragged to the square where he was ritually tortured to the sound of beating drums, then his body was stuffed with straw and suspended from a galley arm on a ship which paraded his corpse along coastlines that may harbour would-be malcontents against Ottoman suzerainty.¹⁴

By comparison the church of St Peter and St Paul fared better, but did not emerge unscathed. Inside it was denuded of all decoration and Christian referencing, in keeping with Islamic attitudes on graven images and heathen idols in the house of God. Sculptures were removed, destroyed or disfigured, while stained glass was replaced with clear glass, where replaced at all. Witness, Paolo Paruta, described the process, which seemed to be driven more by the destruction of symbols of a dishonourable and defeated regime, rather than on theological differences

He [Lala Mustapha] destroyed the altars and the images of the saints, and committed other bestial and cruel acts for which he was much blamed even by his own people.

Even the dead were disturbed in a process which Paruta also described, particularly in the neighbouring cathedral, as thus:

It was mere madness which stirred him [Lala Mustapha] to rage even against the dead. He entered the Episcopal Church of Saint Nicholas, caused the graves to be opened and the bones scattered.¹⁵

From 1571 Christians were not permitted entrance to Famagusta, let alone the cathedrals/ churches/mosques, and so for the next three hundred years the architecture, like the city in general, embarked on the dormant though destructive process of neglect and decay.¹⁶ By 1878 a pioneering Scottish

photographer, John Thomson, could describe Famagusta as “a place of ruins, a city of the dead, in which the traveller is surprised to encounter a living tenant.”¹⁷ Fortunately, however, there was never any real attempt to erase completely the traces of the defeated civilizations and their belief systems from the landscape. Additionally, the post-1571 history of the island effectively guaranteed the ‘cocooning’ of Nestorian, Armenian, Orthodox and Latin architecture through isolation, thus protecting it against all subsequent stylistic alteration or adaptation. What remains today therefore is an intact, though severely damaged, key to fourteenth century Famagusta and its society.

The Church of SS. Peter and Paul: A Historical Survey¹⁸

A late 16th century source suggests that the foundations of the church of Saint Peter and Paul were laid in the Lusignan reign of Peter I (1358 – 1369), and funded by one third of the profits made on a single trip to Syria by a merchant of Famagusta, Simon Nostrano.¹⁹ The idea is reiterated, or maybe simply copied, in further publications dating to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,²⁰ while contemporary scholarship partially corroborates the supposition by stating that this type of exuberant patronage was typical of ‘conspicuous consumption directed to pious ends.’²¹ Camille Enlart, in his masterful study of the island’s architecture in 1899 identified stylistic inconsistencies with the neighbouring cathedral, though could still attribute the decorative work to the same architectural ‘school’ and therefore to marginally earlier in the same ‘period’.²² Due to this discrepancy between decoration and structure, the church has caused enormous confusion among writers, such as George Jeffery, who even doubted that the building was called Saint Peter and Paul at all, suggesting, instead, St Nicholas, and dating it to a much later period. Basil Stewart, writing in 1908, also believed that Enlart had been deceived by the early Gothic ornamentation, and suggested that the church was indeed Orthodox, called St Simeon, and dated to the sixteenth century.²³

Father Stephen Lusignan, writing at the end of the sixteenth century, and so recalling the building shortly before the Ottoman invasion, could comment that it was ‘most beautiful and seemly in its size and very stately in construction’.²⁴ French pilgrim Jean Palerne, in a book entitled *Peregrinations* (1606) observed the next stage in the church’s history when it was serving as a mosque, being the second church, after St Nicholas Cathedral, to experience the minor alterations required to enable the transformation.²⁵ The pilgrim wrote nothing of the desecration or destruction of the structure and so we might assume that the transition to Ottoman rule was a fairly painless one.

Exterior

There are two entrances, though originally there would have been three. Surprisingly the west façade is neither the most elaborately decorated nor the most impressive in scale and detailing as is normally the case in Gothic

architecture. Instead the façade is pierced only with three portals. The northern most one re-converted to a portal from a crude window in 1940. They supported remarkably plain tympana, with extremely sharply pointed arches, consistent with the Champagne tradition. Originally a wooden narthex would have leaned against the west façade. The North portal is more elaborate, being bracketed by four marble columns which are capped by crocketed and foliar capitals which include vine, thistle, oak and sycamore motifs. On the frieze, which interacts stylistically with the capitals, though is physically separate, are some of the very few sculpted figures to survive anywhere in the city. St. Michael, now defaced, is seated and holds the souls of the faithful in his robes. On the facing capital, also guarding the entrance to the church, an angel, resting on one knee, holds a censer. The main portal lintel has three escutcheons, but of their detailing no trace remains. The entire portal is capped with a crocketed gable, which encloses a trefoil and this is seen elsewhere in Famagusta, reinforcing the supposition of a dominant workshop or guild of craftsmen. It is also stylistically very similar to the north portal of St George of the Latins and this too lends weight to the argument that perhaps the portal decoration and sculpture predates the actual church. Archaeologists filled in two Turkish windows cut on either side of the North portal in 1937 and also lowered the entire road to its original level.²⁶

Above are the heavy flying buttresses, in place to drain the pressure away from the interior vaulting, but only on the upper level. They, like the wall itself, are enormously thick and sturdy, presumably in an attempt to resist the disastrous effects of earthquakes. The later substantial buttressing added on the south side probably dates to after the two sixteenth century earthquakes which threatened the structure in its entirety; one even collapsed as late as 1959²⁷. As a result of this caution the church cannot possibly have had either the same structurally light sensation, nor the illumination from the more delicately constructed French contemporary counterparts. Indeed Jeffery sums up:

Nothing could be uglier or more opposed to the beauty of true Gothic architecture than the exterior of this immense church.²⁸

There is evidence of flag-staff holders throughout the exterior of the church, as seen also in the Street of the Knights in Rhodes, and this may have gone someway to lighten the building's apparent structural and monochromatic 'weight'.

Due to significant demolition work on architectural 'concretions' in the mid-twentieth century, specifically in the demolition of the Ashdzi Bashi House in 1938, the west façade has now been cleared from all optical interruptions.²⁹ The roof and apses were also waterproofed at this time using lime-concrete, a gutter was added to drain off excess rain water and some cross ties were added for structural longevity.³⁰ This is the last recorded stabilization and conservation work on the church.

Interior

Naturally, SS Peter and Paul is oriented East-West, with the chevet representing the position of Christ's head on the cross, and symbolizing the direction from which he will return on Judgment Day. The beauty of this church rests almost entirely in its interior, and so what may be perceived as a rather squat and heavily buttressed structure from the outside, transpires to be refined and elegant from an interior perspective. An official British report in 1929 reiterated this saying that the church gave 'an odd impression of poverty and ignorance on the part of the builders' then hastily added 'an impression which is perhaps removed by a view of its striking and impressive interior'.³¹

Saint Peter and Paul has a rigidly symmetrical and rhythmic plan, measuring approx. 24 X 17 metres, and being approximately 20 metres in height, which terminates in an apse, and two apsidal chapels, all of which are semi-domed. Jeffery contested Enlart's supposition that this echoes the influences of the Champagne tradition, and suggested instead that this may owe its stylistic origins to the ecclesiastical architecture of Spain and southern Italy.³² Precisely the same plan, that of a nave (but no ambulatory or transept), two aisles and five bays, can be seen in St. George of the Greeks, also in Famagusta, though in Saints Peter and Paul the east end of the church is enclosed in a squared off elongation of the walls, which may have served as a treasury and which was rebuilt in 1939.

The overall interior appearance is dominated by a refined linear and vertical emphasis as undecorated, moulded, Gothic arches, rise above the rhythmic succession of bays, from plain, circular piers with undecorated capitals. From the abacus of each pier, are three colonettes, merged into the wall, which rising to the clerestory level, fan out to cover the nave and create the cross vaulted ceiling, which gather at roof bosses of floral design and which often bear (unidentified) coats of arms. These upper columns are not heavy like on the lower bay level, and by being broken down into smaller subcomponents deny, visually, the weight that it is being borne. The vaults of the now destroyed St. George of the Greeks, offer a further insight into the structural components behind the 'skin' of the church, specifically with the inclusion of light earthenware in the composite building material used for vaulting.

Sadly the stained glass of the narrow lancets, like the leaded light and stone tracery, are all now long gone and no record exists of their appearance before the destruction of 1571. The British unblocked the stone infill of the windows in 1939-41 and replaced it with the glazed gypsum panels which can be seen today, though these are purely utilitarian, and render the windows mute, in terms of their original narrative and symbolic functions.³³ In the fourteenth century stained glass, pouring light and colour through the clerestory (there is no triforium) and recreated, symbolically, celestial Jerusalem adorned with jewels. Light was central in theological terms too, following the dictum of St John who said "I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life".³⁴ The creation of interior light was crucial also to demonstrate a hitherto unknown engineering prowess that permitted the

support of colossal weights, apparently on glass. The windows of Saints Peter and Paul therefore were designed to permit the light and all the connotations thereof, but to deny the storm – and in the case of Cyprus, earthquakes. The *oie/ de boeuf* window was re-opened sometime between 1938 – 41, as was the west window which today retains a semblance of the dignity of its origin; being three lights divided by two colonettes and mounted by trefoils and quatrefoils set in circles, all encompassed within the overall pointed Gothic arch. This illuminates the remains of the original sycamore wood interior gallery which, itself, rests on stone corbels, and may well have extended externally and crossed the street to the palace.

There are surviving areas of the pavement which remain inlaid with the original small triangles of black and yellow marble, but the rest of the floor is covered with timber of a much more recent origin. Beneath this Enlart located and sketched at least one tomb³⁵ and Jeffery saw two others which he believed were of fourteenth century origin. One bore the image of a knight and the word PREVOST, while the other, much defaced, had a demi-lion rampant.

All interior decoration is fragile, having been ‘cleansed from plastering’ by the British in late 1930s.³⁶ There is, however, some ship graffiti which has been applied to the west wall, to the north of the window. Though badly damaged the bow of the vessel, complete with bow sprit, is visible as are some of the rigging details. The ship theme is recurrent in churches of Famagusta, especially in the apsidal apses of St. George of the Greeks, where the saints have been scratched over with depictions of sailing vessels. Other details include a very fragile, and much disturbed, fresco, high on the north wall. In no documented study of the building is this mentioned, let alone studied, though officials at the Department of Antiquities suggest that it is an original composition. In a crowded scene of semi-clad figures, one seemingly lifeless body is assisted by a bearded principal character, replete in headgear and diaphanous robe around the midriff. A third, badly damaged figure, with left arm raised, is seated and stares directly out into the space we, the viewer, occupy, whilst a fourth sits on the extreme left. There are other figures in the composition but they are so badly damaged it is difficult even to ascertain how many of them there would have been originally. The composition retains barely any of its original colour and it is unclear whether it was an unfinished sketch or an under-drawing for a fuller, more refined composition. Ongoing research suggests strongly that this image is in fact a sinopia (an under drawing for a fresco) and might possibly represent the story of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste. It is, today, in urgent need of conservation.

Concluding thoughts

It is a cruel twist in art historical terminology for ‘Gothic’ to be the umbrella term for this period and ‘style’ in architecture. ‘Gothick’ in Renaissance English meant ‘tasteless’ or ‘un-academic’ and so became synonymous with the barbarianism that plunged Europe into the Dark Ages. But in Famagusta the stones of the great churches embody engineering, aesthetic and theological

enlightenment, affording us a glimpse at the co-existence and contradictions of a wealthy and influential society over half a millennium ago. These fragmented buildings, even in their advanced state of disrepair, offer an insight into much more than simply an architectural history of the island. Instead, they offer us a glance at the society which created them; highlighting almost palpable dialectical tensions between blind religious faith and the pragmatic logic and analytical reason required to construct such edifices. The dichotomy between Christian humility and the fanaticism of religious war are suggested too, exacerbated by the apparent contradiction between the serene humility of devotion and the flamboyance of the architecture and art used for this purpose. The church was instrumental as an institution in the affairs of state and pivotal therefore, in the creation of the socio-politico-artistic nexus between the oriental and occidental, which was to determine Cyprus' fate. The church of SS Peter and Paul, even in its neglected state, is testimony to that fact.

- ¹ The archive from which this passage comes, which also houses many drawings of Famagusta by the traveling monk, is the Akademija Nauk in Kiev. Cited in: R. Severis, *Travelling Artists in Cyprus*, London 2000, 18.
- ² L. Durrell, *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus*, London 1957, 76.
- ³ Famagusta Chamber of Commerce, *Famagusta: Town and District*, Nicosia 1985, 52.
- ⁴ For a comprehensive history of these societies and the historical contextualisation of the church of SS. Peter and Paul see: P. Edbury, *Kingdoms of the Crusaders: From Jerusalem to Cyprus*, Aldershot c1999.
- ⁵ See: J. Richard, 'Les Revoltes Chypristes de 1191-92 et les Infeodations de Guy de Lusignan' in B. Kedar, J. Riley-Smith & R. Hiestand (Eds) *Montjoie*, Aldershot 1997, for a fuller understanding of the history of this transitional period.
- ⁶ For a full record of the coronation ceremony see: R. Gunnis *Historic Cyprus*, London 1936, 90-92.
- ⁷ P. Edbury, 'Latins and Greeks on Crusader Cyprus' in D. Abulafia & N. Berend, *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*, Aldershot 2002, 136.
- ⁸ Makhairas, L. (Trans: R.M. Dawkins) *Recital Concerning the Sweet Land of Cyprus entitled 'Chronicle'*, Oxford 1932, 81. The original 16th century manuscripts are to be found in Libreria Nazionale, Venice (Class. VII, cod. XVI) and the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Selden, supra 14).
- ⁹ See: C. Enlart, *L'Art Gothique et la Renaissance en Chypre*, Paris 1899.
- ¹⁰ J. Folda, 'Crusader Art in the Kingdom of Cyprus c. 1275-91' in: N. Coureas & J. Riley-Smith (Eds) *Cyprus and the Crusades*, Nicosia 1995.
- ¹¹ For a fuller study of the Genoese in Cyprus see: L. Balletto, 'Ethnic Groups, Cross-social and Cross-cultural Contacts on Fifteenth Century Cyprus' in B. Arbel (Ed) *Intercultural contacts in the Medieval Mediterranean*, London 1996.
- ¹² For a fuller study of the the Reign of Caterina Cornaro (1473-1489) see: B. Arbel, *Cyprus, the Franks and Venice 13th – 16th Centuries*, Aldershot 2000. Chapters I and II. For in-depth studies of the nature of Venetian rule in Cyprus and the role of the nobility see Chapters V, VI and XII.
- ¹³ Mas-Latrie, *L'île de Chypre*, Paris 1879, 236-40. St Bridget of Sweden, in her revelations, compared it, less favourably, to Sodom and Gomorrha.
- ¹⁴ The body was then brought to Constantinople for twenty five years, stolen (or ransomed) and now rests in the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice.
- ¹⁵ See: C.D. Cobham, *Bibliography of Cyprus*, Nicosia 1894.
- ¹⁶ For the pre-1571 ethnic divisions in Famagusta see: L. Balletto, 'Ethnic Groups...', 42.
- ¹⁷ J. Thomson, *Through Cyprus with a Camera in the Autumn of 1878*, London 1985, 49.
- ¹⁸ A full history of the institution of the Latin Church in Cyprus can be found in N. Coureas, *The Latin Church in Cyprus: 1195-1312*, Aldershot c1997.
- ¹⁹ Fr S. Lusignan, *Description du Histoire de Cypre*, Paris 1580. Cited in: C. Enlart, *L'Art Gothique et la Renaissance en Chypre*, Paris 1899.
- ²⁰ G.F. Loredano (Henrico Giblet) *Storia de're Lusignani*, Bologna 1647 and also : G. Mariti *Viaggi per L'isola di Cipro et per la Soria et la Palestina :1760-1768 (1769)*. Cited in: C. Enlart, *L'Art Gothique*.
- ²¹ P. Edbury, 'Famagusta in 1300' in *Kingdoms of the Crusaders: From Jerusalem to Cyprus*, Aldershot c1999.
- ²² This is possible as Edbury located and quoted a document from 1301 in which a priest called Dimitrios of the church of SS Peter and Paul is mentioned. P. Edbury, *Kingdoms of the Crusaders*, 343.
- ²³ B. Stewart, *My Experiences in Cyprus*, London 1908.
- ²⁴ Fr S. Lusignan, 1580). Cited in: C. Enlart, *L'Art Gothique*.
- ²⁵ J. Palerne, *Peregrinations*, Lyon 1606, 333. Cited in: C. Enlart, *L'Art Gothique*.
- ²⁶ The Famagusta Photographic Archive [Mogapgap]: Department of Antiquities and Museum: Famagusta. Mr Theophilus Mogapgap was a Lebanese Christian and wrote *Supplementary Excerpts on Cyprus*, Nicosia 1941-45.
- ²⁷ This was re-erected at the cost of 112 pounds. See: *Annual Report of the Director of Antiquities*, Nicosia 1959.
- ²⁸ G. Jeffery, *A Description of the Historic Monuments of Cyprus*, Nicosia 1918, 116.
- ²⁹ Unexpectedly this exposed a cistern at the foot of the minaret which had been unknown to that point. The Famagusta Photographic Archive [Mogapgap].
- ³⁰ The Famagusta Photographic Archive [Mogapgap].
- ³¹ *Annual Report of the Curator of Ancient Monuments*, Nicosia 1929.
- ³² G. Jeffery, *Historic Monuments of Cyprus*, 118.
- ³³ The Famagusta Photographic Archive [Mogapgap].
- ³⁴ Gospel according to St. John, VIII, 12 (Authorised Version).
- ³⁵ C. Enlart, *L'Art Gothique*, 362.
- ³⁶ *Annual Report of the Curator of Ancient Monuments*, Nicosia 1940.